



Illustration: CURTIS TAPPENDEN

WHAT is the secret of the appeal of Paul Theroux's travel writings apart from the fact that many of us like trains as much as he does?

The answer may be that the persona he conveys has much in common with fiction's classic detective heroes Philip Marlowe or Sherlock Holmes.

He is always sleuthing — in his new book\* on his travels in China by train he even visits tower blocks in obscure suburbs to check on whether they really have lifts, and if their inhabitants keep ducks in their sitting rooms.

But, more crucially, Theroux imparts to the readers a profound sense of melancholy successfully overcome. Like Marlowe and Holmes, you feel Theroux must be lonely and must need to drown himself in work.

There is also the contemplative side: Marlowe liked chess and Holmes played his violin; Theroux reads Sinclair Lewis in railway compartments and gets depressed about the young couple making love on the bunk above him.

Paul Theroux makes us feel paths and admiration. He soldiers on and keeps finding things out which we could never have discovered.

The atmosphere of Raymond Chandler is there too. Speaking of the 'stony-faced and charmless Chinese cities' he tells of 'waking in a dreary room, seeing the water-stained ceiling, torn curtains, dented Thermos bottle and rotting carpet, and not knowing whether you are a student, a guest, a patient or a prisoner'.

Theroux openly admits his credo, that 'travel writing is a minor form of autobiography'. And that is the

# Joy-riding with a master sleuth

Robert Temple checks out Paul Theroux's Chinese tour

secret of his compelling quality. As he makes his way across thousands of miles of China by train, we are all on the edges of our seats hoping that he will not burst into tears, and, what is more, that his shadow, Mr Fang, assigned to accompany him, will get some sleep.

## Horror

Theroux's curiosity knows no bounds. On his own admission he 'looked into women's handbags when they opened them just to see what was inside; and opened drawers in people's houses, and read their mail, and searched their cupboards. When a man took out his wallet I tried to count his money.'

Anyone wanting to know what China is really like should read *Riding The Iron Rooster*. As well as describing the commercially aware society of today, the book is full of

horror stories of the cultural revolution (the man locked in a broom cupboard for two years, students murdering each other in the streets).

Theroux has found a way to get under the yellow skin, such as by quoting Mao's thoughts (which he studied when young) to today's Chinese and making them wince: 'A revolution is not a dinner party.'

To Theroux's assertion 'They are taking the capitalist road', Mr Fang replied coldly: 'We do not use that expression any more'.

Theroux keeps on dredging up old terms like 'class enemy' and 'running dog' to provoke comment — and it works.

Alternately writing on trains and stopping off for days at a time in most major cities and many obscure towns, Theroux gives us vignettes that are masterpieces of description and evocation; the unexpected liveliness and charm of the oasis town

of Turfan, the totally deserted and desolate shrine of Mao's birthplace at Shaoshan, which no one visits any more because Mao is the most hated person in China today.

His exposure of the eccentricities of Chinese life is brilliant: 'If there had been a menu it would have been on the menu' and 'By now I was able to differentiate between the various Chinese laughs. There were about 20. None of them had the slightest suggestion of humour. Some were nervous, some were respectful, many were warnings. The loud honking one was a sort of Chinese anxiety attack. Another brisk titter meant something had gone wrong.'

## Forced

As I read Theroux's book I experienced a 21st kind of laugh, one of warm and delighted appreciation and mirth.

And I fully agree with him in not understanding 'why tourists went from city to city, on a forced march of sight-seeing. China existed in all the in-between places that were reachable only by train'.

\**Riding The Iron Rooster* by Paul Theroux (Hamish Hamilton, £14.95)